

## **“ABYSS CALLS OUT TO ABYSS”: OEDIPAL SHAME, INVISIBILITY, AND BROKEN IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>**

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The article derives from the experience of a double self or double reality. The abysses are often those of contradictory values and ideals, and with that opposite contents of shame or guilt, or the conflict between the sense of a deep inner hell that often is unspeakable and unnamable and that of a hollow and empty appearance. Absoluteness of judgment and its correlate, soulblindness toward the other, are the opposite to the empathy into the inner reality of the other. Soulblindness by the others creates massive shame in us. These dynamics are presented in a detailed case study.

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“Abyss calls out to abyss, to the roar of Your cataracts (*tehóm el tehóm qore leqól tzinnorécha*). All Your breakers and billows have swept over me.”<sup>2</sup> What are the disasters to which this metaphor of traumatic inner experience refers? The Biblical text suggests that they are grief, scorn, despair, and being forgotten and abandoned by divinity.<sup>3</sup> Yet what does this image mean for us?

One approach to the question comes from the work of Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–1880/1988 Russian, 1990 English translation). The prosecutor comments on the tragic doubleness of Dimitrij, the son accused of patricide. “When there are two opposites one must look for truth in the middle.” But there is no easily identifiable middle for Dimitrij, who is at once sincerely noble (when he generously offered Katja help without taking advantage of her self-surrender) and base (when he squandered the money borrowed from Katja with his new beloved, Grushenka). We are all, it would seem, “of a broad, Karamazovian nature—capable of containing all possible opposites and of contemplating both abysses at once, the abyss above us, an abyss of lofty ideals, and the abyss beneath us, an abyss of the lowest and foulest degradation. . . . Two abysses, two abysses, gentlemen, in one and the same moment” (Russian, p. 759; English, p. 699).

Such a profound conflict shakes the soul. Dostoyevsky’s Dimitrij is unsure: “Have I gotten into stench and shame, or into light and joy?” Torn

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between the "ideal of Sodom" and the "ideal of the Madonna," for him "the shores converge, here all contradictions live together . . . No, man is broad, even too broad. I would narrow him down . . . Here the devil is struggling with God, and the battle is the human heart" (Russian, p. 117; English, p. 108, modif.). It is a struggle between the ideals of beauty and of mystical union and the sensual passions, between conscience and lust, or we might say, between the superego and the id, between the inner judge and the drives. Yet, from our clinical experience today, we recognize that such a state of inwardly being torn and broken is far more complex than these simple antitheses. Particularly when we speak of the double self or double reality, a chasm opens up in the unendurable conflict between the sense of a deep inner hell that often is unspeakable and unnamable and that of a hollow and empty appearance, "being a shell." This contradiction between deep inner emptiness, that of a devouring "black hole" within, leads to massive despair and the sense of broken reality. Rather than conceptualizing such conflicts in terms of a psychotic core, these dynamics, which I see frequently in the severe neuroses, especially in severe neurotic depressions (the so-called dysthymias), seem to me to be caused by severe traumatization. As a child explained: "There were black hells I had no words for" (Mrs. R. Gaspar, personal communication, 2002).

The anxieties connected with severe trauma, usually repeated and chronic, fail to find any expression, any words, even any images. It is a wordless hole opening, "an infinitely powerful cauldron of pain that annihilates all that enters it" (Hopper, 1991, p. 609). It is the on-rushing torrent of feelings of panic, of guilt and shame that evoke the experience of an abyss calling out to abyss. In approaching such experiences, I have come to realize that shame and guilt figure prominently; both call forth the abyss of despair; both let the sufferer submerge into the sense of absolute abjectness.

While theory is important in sifting through experience and as a guide for how to proceed, specific clinical materials alone have the power to convey to us the essence of these experiences and conflicts.

#### **A SMALL SPARK AND HOWLING GHOSTS**

Karin is a 50-year-old, recently married woman with a 2-year-old child. She has suffered her entire life from hammering self-criticism and inner condemnation. In her experiences of self-condemnation, shame appears more prominently than does guilt, and with her shame and self-condemnation appear chronic depersonalization and an often-paralyzing depression and deep despair, even to the point of a dissociative disorder. Her very first words when she came to treatment were: "I want to repair the tapes in my

head—what I have from my mother—they are so negative and destructive. I question everything. If I could only change this!"

I saw her at first at low frequency, but we changed after half a year to full analysis. Here are a few snippets from her biography: Her father, a salesman described as dignified and mellow, died a few years ago, partly as a consequence of alcohol abuse. Her mother had and has periods of frenetic activity, of agitated, irritable depression, and of chronic anger. There was much fighting and unpredictability at home, which was experienced as a chronic traumatization. Karin was the oldest of four, with a sister 3 years younger, and a brother 9 years younger; in-between, there was a sister who died shortly after birth, when Karin was 8. A later trauma occurred when she visited her aunt overseas, and her uncle violated her sexually. It was a heavy blow to her because she took his attention as genuine interest. When she finally dared to bring it up at home, it was negated, yet she was blamed for it. Her first intimate friendship with a young man was blocked massively by the parents of both, and eventually she was shipped out of town.

To pick up the thread of her description again:

I hear this constant voice in my head: "You don't do this right, and you don't do that right." And I am like a hamster running in his wheel. . . . It is like a mold in me: unless I open the window [and speak with somebody about it] and let the fresh air kill the mold, it quickly takes over everything. It becomes more and more poisonous.

At other times, she speaks of being in a steel prison or standing in front of a huge grizzly bear threatening to suffocate her. She continues, giving at least one etiological hint that has always been conscious:

Last week I thought I would explode. I was with my mother. I am always very vigilant around her, waiting for the next criticism, the next commentary. That is familiar. I incorporated it all in me. It is internal and external. I run back and forth trying to stave off her criticism. It is impossible.

**L. W.:** "What is the content?"

**Karin:** "It is constant, it is everything. I am automatically on guard. She examines everything that I do and it is subject to her criticism. It is not *one* standard. If I then do the 'right' thing she would criticize me that I do not do it the other way . . . In that instant when I realized that about my mother, I saw how trapped I am: it is an illusion to think that if I do the right thing it would be the key to unlocking the door of acceptance. There is no door to unlock. The door has no keyhole and not even a doorknob, and when I think if I just do the right thing, I would find acceptance, it is not there. . . . I wanted so desperately for

them to be satisfied with me, to have some joy with me and my existence . . . I would like to have that monkey off my back that constantly says: 'Why don't you do this right?' . . . These five words are the essence of my being: '*You are not good enough.*' This I know as my truth. I have no other to choose from. I am extremely skeptical that any change can come. I know nothing else. This is so much part of what I am" (Session 99)—the ground of her identity and its underground (*Grund und Abgrund*).

Subsequently, the extent it is jealousy and envy that have to be blocked off by this implacable inner judge becomes clearer:

I had no sense of myself, as a definition, who I was. The other people were all competitors, and then I always lost, when I compared myself with them. You see them [the siblings] only as competition instead of as allies and complements, who would care about you and strengthen you. Everybody is only a rival.

She elaborates how the praise given was, and still is, very quickly turned into its opposite, "as if a huge hand yanked it away: 'You cannot have that, that is not yours.' And I have to begin all over again."

I say at this point: "So that the underground of the inner judge is the competition, much jealousy and envy, and this would open up when the cellar were to be opened, and this is very frightening." The competition is so hopeless anyway, she adds, and the jealousy and envy are so painful, and the huge hand would come anyway, so that she does the rejecting and judging first, before it would come from without, actively instead of passively: "Then I have control" (Session 100).

After several sessions of increasing anxiousness, briefly interrupted by the memory of a consoling dream about a wonderful stag accompanying her into a northern forest, she recalls how, a few days ago, an acquaintance had reminded her how Karin's mother had sent back the invitations to her baby shower and wedding and refused to attend either because Karin was to give birth out of wedlock. Being reminded of this, she immediately had been overwhelmed with incredible sadness and anger about feeling again cheated out of the celebration of herself, as it had been all along, at her graduations from high school and college. This had been followed by overwhelming shame:

"It was not joyous but painful and shameful . . . being treated as the outsider . . . the inner voice: you have accomplished nothing . . . I felt instantly guilty: I shamed my mother; her behavior is entirely explainable; everything is my fault. It was connected with so much shame: the whole rest of the world has different rules. I could not celebrate openly, joyously. Everything had to be done in secrecy, in hiding . . . There never were to be an event that would make me three-

dimensional, real, separate . . . It [sadness and shame] was like a giant hand that grabs my heart and won't let go . . . I saw clearly how unentitled I always felt. This morning I felt like locked in a glass tube: nobody can see me.

Perhaps more precisely stated: Everyone can see her only too well, as outward appearance, as a false self, but no one can see her true inner self. Between the two, there is an unbridgeable chasm. It is a broken reality.

Yet, just as important is the observation of the sequence: The scenario is one of first feeling shamed, then angry, and finally paralyzingly sad. All the aggressions appear to be turned against the self, and this is quasi personified, almost mythically, in the shape of a spirit of self-condemnation.

Then, Karin's self-castigation turns to her very troubled marriage and changes into a total sense of unworth, paralysis, and unexplainable anxiety. Now, in the psychoanalytic reeling back of the inner and outer events of the last few days, she not only recognizes this scenario as a meaningful sequence, but also understands the anxiety and its grounding in the judgment by "that god of self scorn" (discussed below):

I blame myself before they would criticize me. My whole life is so: I do it internally before anybody else can do it. See: I have done it even worse than anybody else could; so don't bother! I feel so destroyed. At least, if I do it myself and am two-dimensional, I can go through the day. When it comes from the outside, I feel annihilated.

The "it" is a conglomerate of rejection, blame, shame, guilt, a state of total condemnation, now all turned from passive to active:

When I see them come with the whip against me, I have two choices: I stand there, frozen, and let them whip me. Or, to get another whip and start lashing myself: "Now you don't need to do it." Probably there are more, but I see only these two alternatives in my life. For me, this is the only way to survive. If I let you whip me, I crumble to ashes. Rather exist with scars and bloody, and do it with my own hands than not to exist, as it would be if I let them whip me and I would be shattered. . . . It is as if my mother erased me all the time. I felt not legitimate, made myself invisible.

All independence, all the steps undertaken on her own, all separateness were punishable and ended in this fundamental experience of invisibility, a primary aim, experience, and symbol of shame (Wurmser, 1981/1994; Kilborne 2002).

In accordance with this basic pattern, Karin married a man of unbounded explosive rage in the vain hope that he at least would at the end of the whipping give her that forgiveness that she cannot give herself (Sessions

103 and 104). One of the analytic questions is, of course, again and again: Against whom is the anger directed, now, a few days ago, ages ago, before it is being turned so massively against the self?

After the insights into this paradigmatic scenario, she feels much better:

So much stronger, sturdier. I feel a substantial self, three-dimensional . . . As you said: This old self is valuable. I should not discard it. I felt so wonderfully about it . . . Even when a teacher was very kind to me and tried to draw me out, it was very difficult for me to be visible, painful after not having been seen for so long: to step out of the mirror, to break the glass, to be born. It is excruciatingly painful to be visible [as myself] because I become then vulnerable. My appearance was always very important for me. I needed it like a shield and carried it as a mask.

I asked her directly what she saw as the inner conflict in all this. She replied: “One is the *emphasis on appearance* [italics added], the need for conformity, like my mother: looking to the outer world. The other thing is: *being yourself* [italics added]” (note the impersonal formulation) “an individual even when crappy and messy.”

I continued, “And with both there is occasion for shame: if you do not appear good, but also when you are not yourself.” She immediately added a third reason for shame:

“Being yourself and failing . . . It is a huge relief when someone can get past that outer appearance, the armor. It was like a prison . . . I thought no one was so: so frozen, so very lonely and alone, that there was something wrong with me, the shame—instead of a reason to rejoice. They are all human feelings . . . It is as if I was crossing a stream, very cautiously stepping from stone to stone. With you and with T. [a girlfriend], I feel safe to go on to the next rock. I am acutely sensitive that I would run against that brick wall, to have someone ridicule me: This is a bad way to feel. And then I would run back again across the stream. There is an incredible longing to go ahead over the stream. Now I am only about one third across, yet I’ve gone farther than in a long time. Yet I am still anticipating a response that would be ridicule.

**L. W.:** “Even here and with T.?”

**Karin:** “Yes. I’m waiting. I have no experience that would tell me otherwise. With every step there is the battle: whether I should take it. I fight with myself whether I should wait for you to tell me: that it would be ridiculous. Then I do not hear it from you or from myself, and I do it. It is exhausting. It is astounding to make it to the next stone. Every step is so hard won; every rock is a voyage around the world” (Sessions 133 and 134).

We speak about several self-figures: Her first self is one that is submissive; it is one that cowers and is ashamed under the whipping of the inner judge:

The more I am betrayed, the more I move toward the perpetrator, like the moth to the flame . . . Burrowing deeper like a dog that goes after varmint and is bitten on the nose. Instead of backing out, I go even deeper in it. I switch off the feelings [and claim]: "this is not hell, and I am not here. It does not matter; it does not really hurt. It is not so bad as it looks"—the depersonalization.

**L. W.:** "What is the second self?"

**Karin:** "It is incredible *anger* [italics added] at having to behave that way. I hate it."

**L. W.:** "And is not the third self that you felt in the art class—beyond rage and shame?" to be concentrated on something creative, instead of the destructiveness.

**Karin:** "My whole life has been buffeted between self number one and self number two and to try to make some sense out of it . . . What did compel me to continue being involved in all this? Like Lady Macbeth, washing again and again—why? I thought a lot about it. Why have I been a doormat with my family? Wanting to be needed, to have my place! To belong. Somewhere."

I enlarge her interpretation: "Better to suffer than to be alone: 'Torture me, but don't abandon me!' Therefore, you keep moving always closer: the more torture, the closer you move because the torturing is no love, and the danger of abandonment only grows . . . The more torture, the less love and the stronger the fear of abandonment."

**Karin:** "You have to admit: it is a profound choice to make between torture and abandonment. Like E. M. Forster's: 'Only connect!' That is what there is in life: to interact, intersect, at least to be connected with someone, even if it is damaging. You can die in the vacuum if you are abandoned. It is a hell of a choice. What is the alternative?"

**L. W.:** "The third self: love and respect." (Sessions 137 and 138).

In her depression, Karin compares herself to a single sled dog who tries in vain to pull a huge burden:

Instead of being part of a team of dogs pulling a sled, she is alone in harness. But I cannot pull it by myself, and I am not strong enough to pull it alone. I had the illusion of the momentum. This big thing is behind me, and I cannot even see it. I am strapped to it, and I leap up to run ahead, only to be met by that heavy object behind me that I don't understand.

"And add to it the wolves behind you." I am reminded of a passage in a Swedish classic, Marianne Sinclair's words in Lagerlöf's (1891/1978) *Gösta Berlings Saga* (a revered grandfather of Karin came from Sweden):

We, however, thought of the strange spirit of self-consciousness [self-observation: *själviakttagelsens underliga ande*] that had already entered our inner life. We thought of him as the one with the icy eyes and the long, bent fingers . . . the

spirit with icy eyes [*anden med isögonen*], . . . contemptuously smiling at evil and good . . . that pale guardian at the fountainhead of the actions . . . the *god of self scorn* [jeering at the self: *självförhållandets gud*]. (pp. 114–115).

I mention to her here the last words of this passage and add the scene of the pursuing wolves in the story. She responds that she permits this pale guardian to define her by his scorn.

Something very important is now added: She forgets everything good from moment to moment, from day to day. "I lose my memory how life was before; the same happened earlier at my job [in regard to any praise]. Like Sisyphus . . . It negates everything that came before, the inevitability. Nothing else matters. This defines me."

A poignant image is drawn by Bach (2001):

*A profound discontinuity: that nothing good can be held onto* [italics added] . . . Who is not remembered and perceived as a continuous self forgets himself and thus his inner continuity . . . a person's specific memories and experiences are like individual beads that can achieve continuity and gestalt form only when they are strung together to become a necklace. The string on which they are assembled is the child's continuous existence in the mind of the parent, which provides the continuity on which the beads of experiences are strung together and become the necklace of a connected life." (p. 748)

And that of an identity. The experience of meaning and of time grow out of a sense of connectedness of experience, and this in turn grows with the remembrance by and of the other in one's own inner life.

In his beautifully written and important book, *Disappearing Persons—Shame and Appearance*, Kilborne (2002) stresses the central role of the feeling of shame for this sense of identity and inner continuity. He cites Milan Kundera: "Shame is one of the key notions of the Modern Era . . . we enter adulthood through the rebellion of shame" (p. 70). Crucial to the understanding of the link between shame and identity is the polarity of fantasies of appearance and anxiety over disappearing (p. 5). This polarity and its inherent dialectic shape our identity: "To imagine what we are looking at, to imagine ourselves looking and being looked at while looking—all seem essential to our sense of who we are, and to some confidence in the continuity of our lives" (p. 70). In reverse, it means, as one of Kilborne's patients states: "You could say that you are without an identity when you can't recognize in others what you can't see in yourself. Without an identity you can't make a connection" (p. 32). I may poignantly add the reverse: without a connection and relationship you can't create an identity. This discontinuity of being seen and seeing oneself is preeminently rooted in the



shame created by the *soulblindness* of others, paramount of course by the parents' soulblindness. Kilborne speaks therefore of

their [his patients'] overpowering feeling that they are unrecognizable, that there is no place for them as themselves, that consequently they are struggling against both fears of recognition and fears of being not-seen . . . [In the transference] they repeat the sense of being doomed to be invisible, while longing for recognition. (p. 26).

We saw in Karin her sense of invisibility and the black hole of abysmal shame.

For her, the ceaseless and implacable self-devaluation keeps asserting itself, but not without a counterforce:

There is this *small spark* in me that is so enraged, so angry [at this inner voice demanding] that I have to give up everything, that completely wipes out who I am. It defines me. These *banshees* come flying in from all sides and surround me, screaming and yelling: "You bad person. Nothing what you have done counts. You are nothing." But there is this small piece that hides, that is pissed: "That is not true. That is not fair. That is not right." I cannot remember that I ever did not feel that way, when I would have felt freer, stronger.

**L. W.:** "You certainly did lead a competent life. Right there is the doubleness. There are the banshees and the spark, and, side by side with them, is the competent life."

**Karin:** "Three personalities?"

**L. W.:** "More accurately: the *cowering, depressed, depersonalized self* and the *angry, defiant self* [joined together]. And side by side with these two: *the competent person*."

**Karin:** "But that felt hollow. I had to hide the inner battle. Even when things were good I could never enjoy it. I was always stacking up ammunition in order to be fortified before the banshees swoop in again." (Session 145).

But, what is the meaning of this absoluteness of expectation and, as consequence, the intensity of self-condemnation? In the following session, I mentioned: "The expectation that is too high . . . the *absoluteness* . . . and it rears its head in the marriage: both of you are very absolute people."

**Karin:** "On some plane it is essential to my survival: being absolute—something that would be so clear as a standard I can measure things with. It's the only thing that I can trust, even when it is so high and unrealistic and unworkable. It keeps me shoved in the little corner: You are not good enough, you don't measure up. It feels impossible."

**L.W.:** "So it is either the splendid ideal or the black hole."

**Karin:** "And my bouncing between the two, hitting the ceiling and crashing down in the hole. I never find the right house" [referring to their search for a new house, and her massive self-berating after their having decided on one to buy].

**L. W.:** "... why was being so absolute necessary for survival?"

**Karin:** *"It helped to give structure to a world that was so unpredictable . . . The absoluteness gave me the purpose [for being]."*

She agrees that she owned from very early a very strong conscience. At first it appears as if it were a disidentification from her mother, a negative identity built around the protest against the values and identity of her mother.

**Karin:** "What defined me from many others was that I constantly was stepping out of myself and could look at the bigger picture; what is right, fair and makes sense?" [She then comes to her father]: "He had a sense of fairness."

**L. W.:** "By having an absolute conscience, you were allied with your father's ideal."

**Karin:** "And when he was spineless, it was such a betrayal and disappointment! I felt black when my mother accused me of being the favorite of my father. It was a fall from grace, so ugly and mean. It was like an expulsion from Eden. I soaked up everything about my father. He was smart, funny, and a good person, honorable, not dishonest. My mother is manipulative, sneaky, and she would lie."

**L. W.:** "Thus, the absoluteness means the negative identity: not to be like your mother, and absolutely to be like his ideals and your ideal of him" (Sessions 146 and 147).

In the absolutely set ideals (of integrity and truthfulness, of caring, of reliability), she looks for the lost father, and in the self-condemnation, she reexperiences the disappointment in him, but now reincarnated in her own self: She hates him in herself as the disappointing one, as the failing one, because she now expects from herself the absolute that she had hoped for in him.

The experience of shame splits the world and creates the deep discontinuity we met before. Not to be seen in the eye of the other the way that one wants to see oneself means that one's identity vanishes, and emptiness and meaninglessness spread. Kilborne (2002) described the ensuing vicious circle very well: "Too much unbearable shame leads to a loss of the self, and a loss of self generates more shame. And unconscious shame leads to greater dependency upon both what others see of us and what we imagine they see" (p. 92). He speaks of the powerful "illusion that we can control our internal feelings by controlling how we appear" (p. 114), exemplified

in other patients (not in Karin) by their compulsion to buy clothes (really an addiction to wanting to appear and to seem) and the urge to plastic surgery, the clinging to a pretend identity.

When these scenes of "judging instead of exploring" are reversed into "exploring instead of judging" (Gray, 1994, and personal communication; Wurmser, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a), Karin feels as if a huge weight were lifted from her: the weight of the archaic superego, with its radical guilt for being herself and her equally radical shame for not being herself (Session 105) (besides the competing motives for shame mentioned). From wishes and fears of disappearing to preoccupations with competition, envy, and fears of being inevitably bested, to the gulf between splendid ideal and black hole, to self-inflicted pain and scorn (she is the god of self-scorn), and to her experience of being fated to choose between torture and abandonment, much fits Kilborne's concept of oedipal shame.

#### **ABSOLUTENESS OF JUDGMENT AND DENIAL OF REALITY**

Why oedipal shame? I believe it is a concept derived more from the Sophoclean figure than from the oedipal conflict or phase. Kilborne (2002) circumscribed it by "feelings of profound defeat (failed competition), annihilatory self-criticism (failed self-worth), helplessness (failed cries for help, rage, and basic threats to self-image and psychic viability)" (p. 3). What we have seen in Karin is born out by another quotation from Kilborne:

Oedipal shame grows in dysfunctional families where conflicts between parents and children are avoided rather than recognized, where conflicts themselves are often felt to be shameful and humiliating, where the child's shame for parental failures contributes to secrecy and to the child's omnipotent fantasies of protecting his parents, and where parental responsibilities become confused and compromised. In such families children come to repeat unconsciously patterns of defeat and humiliation. (p. 120)

Crucial to it is, as already mentioned, the polarity of fantasies of appearance and anxiety over disappearing.

If we deepen and broaden this important observation relating the affect of shame to a broad context of meaning and link it to the problem of absoluteness, we recognize the following: In the severe neuroses (and they are almost coextensive with severe and chronic traumatization in childhood), we deal on the one side with wishes insisting on their absolute fulfillment and equally global affects, in particular the manifold, overwhelming anxieties, but also rage and shame and guilt (and others) that involve similar claims for absoluteness. On the other side, the defensive processes trying

to protect the self against the overpowering dangers from without and within are equally absolute, equally radical and all encompassing. Ultimately, the conscience and the "ideal demands" (used by Ibsen [in "The Wildduck"] "den ideale fordringen") become the leading representatives of this inner absoluteness, and with that we have those fatal vicious circles, the repetitive patterns Kilborne (2002) talked about (also Wurmser, 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2000b, 2001a). Inner polarity in its entirety is then marked by such absoluteness. Abyss calls out to abyss!

Psychodynamically, the prominence of broken reality, both experiential and observable, can, therefore, not only be understood as the outcome of *defense against traumatization*, but also at the same time as *defense against superego pressure* or, more precisely, against contradictory superego demands, like opposing values and ideals, commitments and loyalties, and especially shame against guilt (shame–guilt dilemmas: Wurmser, 1981/1994, 1993, 2000b, 2001b). Confronted with these antitheses (intrasystemic super-ego conflicts), the individual feels powerless, even fragmented: torn asunder.

Yet, it is not so that the human being, unless succumbing to madness, has renounced altogether what is relative at the behest of what is absolute. Quite the contrary is true: Large portions of everyday living and the everyday personal mask are marked by what is conditional, functional, and contingent. In Karin, we see this doubleness in the uneasy coexistence of wild inner conflict ("spark" and "banshee") and external, at least temporary, efficiency.

It happens in the collapse, it happens in tragic experience and suffering that what is absolute and what is relative vehemently clash with each other, within and without. Generally speaking, in severely traumatized patients, a deep sense of shame, of feeling humiliated, excluded, and expelled, and with that of worthlessness, play a leading role. This has to be attributed to far more than just external humiliation, but often very much to the soul-blindness of the other (i.e., to the experience that one has not been perceived in one's most essential feelings, wishes, and as presented by Kilborne (2002), one's conflicts, by the most important others, especially mother and father, later by friends and teachers). The consequence of this is that the inner world as a whole, especially all the affects, is viewed as something totally unacceptable and tuned out in global affect defense by denial. The anxiety about the feelings means, in particular, shame for their overwhelming character, for their "being too much," facing the *No* of the other. Thus, one is ashamed of all the feelings and of standing there as someone who claims his own identity because this identity hides within an unfulfilled neediness and is full of sadness and pain (Gruen, 2000).

It is the hallmark of traumatization that the stirred up emotions are overwhelming (i.e., global and dedifferentiated), that they cannot be named

anymore, and that they are resomatized (Krystal, 1988, 1998) and retraumatizing. It is the black hole, the limitless despair we also know so well from survivors of the Holocaust. Something concrete is then sought that could give word and meaning to the unspeakable desperation and defend against the horror.

Typically, in severe childhood trauma, sexualization is then deployed as an attempt to regulate affects. Both the flooding with affects and the very archaic defense by sexualization leads to an overwhelming feeling of shame. On an additional front line of defense, aggressive wishes, impulses, and fantasies are thrown in as means to reestablish control; they should stop the further tumble into that regressive spiral.

This archaic equation of traumatic affect storms, sexualization, and aggression leads, on the one hand, to global forms of defense, above all of denial, externalization, and projection, and as a result to the observable dissociative phenomena, as in the various self-figures seen in Karin. On the other hand, it leads to massive countermeasures by the superego in the form of the same absoluteness and pervasiveness of shame and guilt. Much of this hypertrophy of the superego consists of the dominating fantasy of omnipotent responsibility set up as protection against traumatic helplessness.

With this affect regression, the core criterion of trauma, every kind of excitement turns into overexcitement and overstimulation, and this has to lead inevitably to a crash, to a very painful disappointment. This traumatic, passively experienced process is, again and again, turned around into something actively reenacted and provoked, namely, that every joy, every gratification, every expectation, everything good has to be broken off and changed into something negative and bad. It may seem as if an unconscious guilt made it appear as if one did not deserve to be successful (and this may indeed contribute), but that dangerous excitement and the ensuing mortifying disappointment and shame appear to be more important: "It is too dangerous to sense pleasure and joy; it will be abruptly taken away or it will become unbearably intense and totally unfulfillable." Thus, the inner judge, the archaic superego, has to prevent all pleasure. It shows itself the aforementioned doubleness—on the one side a very rigid inner authority, on the other side a large-scale disregard for boundaries and limitations.

The transference often shows the reversal of shaming, namely, that now the analyst is just as devalued and debased as the patient sees herself as worthless. Karin fears I might be a charlatan who has enticed her into the swamp of despair and paralysis, but cannot help her to get out again, in my words: "that I would be just another person who disregards and shames you—a false messiah and counterfeiter" (Session 144). Not only have I brought her into this anxiety filled hell, but also, as she says in the following

session, I would abandon her forever: "I had a brief flash at the door: that there was no sign there anymore of you—that everything of you here would be gone" (Session 145). The hole of traumatic loss is thus reexperienced in the transference.

A child full of sadness and pain, yet denying it, a person who has experienced the trauma of invisibility and who keeps fearing it, but also seeking it out, replaces the lacking love by the condiments of success or, in Karin's case, by the adjustment to a world of external appearance. Kilborne commented (2002): "Those who find that they cannot imagine themselves in the eyes of others rely ever more compulsively on their appearance in a vain effort to make themselves intelligible, an awareness of which leads to extraordinary vulnerability" (p. 27), trying to repress their "inward nakedness" (Milton, cited on p. 124). "The more powerful the fantasies to control appearances . . . , the stronger the need to control feelings" (p. 130).

They look for love and respect in the adoration by others without finding them there, but feeling forced then to denigrate their own self and the others. The relationship appears to be stripped of value because it never is what is really needed, after a kind of "Let them eat cake!" They chase and chase after success, but the sadness follows them like a shadow; the feeling of lovelessness empties their existence. Idealization of the other and self-adulation substitute for an authentic relationship. The analytic sessions themselves may be used for the presentation of brilliance so that the analyst idolizes them. A world of imagery and of seeming understanding of the other replaces true empathy; manipulation with the help of charm brings success and often huge gratification, but simultaneously at a price of a sense of hollowness and inauthenticity.

Karin described her totalitarian conscience's radical "judgmentalness" and with that its extreme polarizations, the telltale signs of the archaic superego. What seems absolute can be so only thanks to the denial of all that does not fit into that image. One side of reality that is set up as absolute opposes another side of reality that cannot be seen, experienced, and named. This other side returns as the demonic world and is condensed in the figure of the Devil. Indeed, in the Kabbala one name for the Evil is *sitra achra*, meaning the "other side." In Karin, it appeared in a childhood drawing as a black person within herself whom she loathed and feared. Yet, this dark figure was her authentic self who only now, in the analysis, recognizes its right to exist: "Who I am is not right. I have to change it, it's like creating a split; to put a part aside; to get by. I drew the picture of myself with this *little black person in me*."

**L. W.:** "The self that was not being seen."

**Karin:** "I thought that it was evil and sick, a bad thing, that I had to make it go

away, dangerous and evil, not to show to the rest of the world, and I was crazy because I had that side in me."

**L. W.:** "And in spite of that, it was perhaps the *authentic self*."

**Karin:** "It's such a switch: I looked at it so: that it would jump out of me, evil, unpredictable, and scare everybody. It always was a bad thing, and I was hiding it in my closet."

She quoted a line from a beautiful poem of the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott (in Housden, 2001): "You will love again the stranger who was your self" (p. 95). Karin's splitting into what is put forward as absolute and what is denied is itself an expression of a much more encompassing split and double reality. This world of radicalization and totalization, and with that of omnipotence and helplessness, is juxtaposed with the world that we share, that what we usually mean with reality (Novick and Novick, 1996a, 1996b, 2003). The first universe knows no boundaries; it is the world of dreaming, the world of the absolutes, of the mythical experience; the second universe is a world of distinctness and differentiation, of limitations, the consensual validity of perception (*Wahr-nehmung* as *Als-wahr-nehmen*, i.e., "perception" as "taking as true"). The side-by-side existence of these two worlds means that yes and no are equated in crucial areas, that the contradictions coexist as if they were not contradictions. This split between acknowledgment and denial (Freud, 1927, 1940a, 1940b) can be found in us all, not only in our patients.<sup>4</sup> In the severe neuroses, especially in character perversion (Wurmser, 2001b, in press), it just is far more pronounced.

The absoluteness of judgment and its necessary correlate, the partial or complete soulblindness toward the other, can thus be seen as the opposite to the empathy into the inner reality of the other, to the deep understanding of the particular perspective of the other, to the ability to imagine how the other views and experiences the shared existence. Soulblindness is, at least partly, based on defense (the other part being due to very early and continuous learning); the defense is a wholesale denial of the feelings and the will of the other, and implicitly also of one's own self. Soulblindness by the other creates massive shame in us: Our own being is as nothing, not worth being noticed. The eye expresses this contempt. Wherever massive denial rules, reality has to be riven: the doubleness of self and world, the yes and the no.

To be sure, every defense leads to a splitting of self-experience (Fingarette, 1969), and the blunter and more severe this defense, the more radical is the experience of the inner split. These radical forms of splits are the logical result of the absoluteness, the globality not only of the affects, but also of the identifications, of the introjections, and of the other defenses, and hence of all the conflicts in question. What is absolute is not compati-

ble with something else that claims equal absoluteness; global demands exclude each other. However, among all the factors, there are above all the superego's demands for absoluteness and exclusivity, its categorical judgments, that observably stand godfather to these processes of splitting.

And this is what typically happens in such splitting of identity: One superego part that is allied with the external world and incessantly pushes for adaptation and conformity (the "shell," "the banshees," "the appearance") is being fought and often overthrown by another part that insists on its own, more autonomous values or that proudly, even arrogantly, reclaims its honor and its rights ("the spark"). This second, rebellious, usually more regressive, part of the superego manifests itself in narcissistic fantasies and archaic images of the ego ideal, and with that in massive self-condemnations for all signs of vulnerability or weakness. In this battle between the "adaptive" and the "regressive" superego parts, there are often intermediate forms, interim solutions, with a blending of the two superego antagonists.

In this field of tension between absolute and relative forces, there arises the need for comparison, and with that the angry objection that I am "less than" (shame) and want to be "more than" (envy); that I have "less than" (pain) and want to have "more than" (jealousy); that I do not understand the whole and am confused (the sense of absurdity) and yet want to listen to the songs of eternal reason and lawfulness (the daring and haughty claim of reason); that I revolt against suffered injustice (resentment), but eventually break apart in suffering and despair on the rock of this unfairness without giving up the absolutely held value (the tragic).

What it is all about is the overcoming of the absoluteness. Tragic truth means the insight into the irreconcilability of absoluteness and measure.

I conclude with Walcott's poem that Karin quoted (Housden, 2001, p. 95):

*"Love after Love.*

The time will come  
When, with elation,  
You will greet yourself arriving  
At your own door, in your own mirror,  
And each will smile at the other's welcome,

And say, sit here, Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was yourself.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored  
For another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,



The photographs, the desperate notes,  
Peel your image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life."

## NOTES

1. Presented in German first in Lindau, German Psychotherapy Weeks, April 19, 2002; then in Hamburg, Munich, Zurich, Düsseldorf, Regensburg, and Berlin.
2. Psalm 42.8 quoted after "JPS Tanakh," modif.
3. In contrast, the great German mystic Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1327) used the same passage "abissus abissum invocat" to ask that the depth of the mystical word be responded to by the depth of its interpretation (Ruh, 1989, p. 51).
4. I consistently use the term *split* or *splitting* in a phenomenological sense, not as explanatory; it describes very well and in an experience-near way the outcome of complex defensive processes. I do not see it as a basic defense in its own right (Wurmser, 2000a).

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